

THE CONTEMPORARY US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: ASSERTIVENESS AND DETERRENCE

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Abstract

The present US-Russian bilateral relations demonstrate change and continuity of their geopolitical responses to the different events in international affairs. Some of these events involve certain geopolitical borders which have become the global hotspots for the US and Russian geopolitical interests. Assertiveness is a feature of great powers' conduct in world affairs and in terms of the US-Russian assertiveness, it contributes to equilibrium or disequilibrium, stability or instability of the international system. The central argument in this article is that there are new geopolitical borders that have triggered a renewed and determined assertiveness between the US and Russia. Secondly, these two important major powers stand in an unclear stance between the determination to defend its status and its proxies and the will to find common ground in order to avoid an escalation of tension towards each other. To pursue the path of diplomacy and avoid a direct confrontation or escalation of tension, the US and Russia are pursuing geopolitical alignments that serve their strategic designs through assertiveness and complex deterrence approaches.

Key words: US-Russian relations, assertiveness, deterrence, realism, geopolitical border

Introduction

The scope of this article is the confrontational aspect of the US-Russian relations which continues to be the cornerstone of the 21st century's stability or instability as far as world politics and the ongoing conflicts within it are concerned. This article looks at the operational aspect of assertiveness between the US and Russia at the main geopolitical borders of the moment. Assertiveness has been recognized by scholars and policy-makers as an existing feature of great powers' politics and it can be defined as the will to use military force or undertake unilateral initiatives in international crises and situations to boost up their positions in the international system, US as the hegemon and Russia as the great power. The geopolitical borders are the situations or countries that represent clash of vital interests for the major powers and other countries involved in a certain situation or crisis.

The geopolitical borders produce both assertiveness and limitations. Concretely in the cases of Ukraine and Syria, the US and Russia have each demonstrated their willingness to stand by their allies that are viable to the emerging American and Russian geopolitical designs in the Middle East and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Currently the CIS member states are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine. In Ukraine and Syria, the US and Russia have refrained and hesitated for a full military engagement to avoid a direct US-Russian conflict, but this in return has broadened the extent of the conflict in the Ukrainian and Syrian ground. The American and Russian slow or stagnant diplomatic

engagement prolongs the crises and contributes to the local players' anticipation for more violence and resistance against the other, and therefore more casualties along the way.

This bilateral affair has been the most important relationship of world politics, at least since when the US and Russia emerged as great powers in the structure of world politics. Whether multi-polarity, tri-polarity, bipolarity or hegemony, both these countries have been at the center of the world system. Whether USSR-US or Russia-US, it continues to shape the configuration of the international political scenario and the conflicts and alignments that take place within it. Furthermore, this bilateral affair has been usually framed as a democracy-authoritarianism form of cooperation or confrontation.

This article highlights that the US-Russian assertiveness has been mutual and rational, continuing from past relations as well as new ones, according to the new geopolitical borders at the time. Both have the mentality of the great power or superpower, and both are contesting for its own geopolitical influence within the political-security architecture of Europe, Middle East and Asia. The new Russian assertiveness has brought a new phase of post-Cold War relations, in which US as the superpower, Russia as the Eurasian power and other major powers are uncertain of how to simultaneously defend their national interests and re-adjust the bilateral relations according to the challenges and opportunities that keep rising. Concretely, as long as the geopolitical borders of Ukraine, Syria, recently even North Korea has become an uncertain scenario, and the strategic stability remain unsettled politically and diplomatically at the bilateral level of the US-Russian relations, the US remains determined to defend the transatlantic unity, strength and its leadership and Russia remains determined to remain an independent great power in world politics. The US has been concerned with the Western hemisphere leadership and expansion since the Monroe Doctrine,² and in this strategy the US-Europe cooperation has always been the geopolitical alignment that created and maintains the West. Russia too has emphasized its own Monroe Doctrine regarding the former USSR region throughout its transformational periods. Due to an independent assertiveness, the US and Russia is each pursuing a closer approach with China to weaken the other. China has its own foreign policy approach of rising silently economically and militarily.

The current US-Russian bilateral atmosphere has revealed once again the layers of historical mistrust and their conflicting views on global events. Presently, the battle is not for Europe but for the CIS area, and in the emerging Middle East the conflicting views are about establishing a relevant frame of assessment that suits most to one's strategic interests regarding the issues of terrorism, civil wars and internal weakening of the Middle Eastern countries. In such a Middle Eastern scenario, the outcome is going to be either still the same players or different countries with different borders playing a new role in the geopolitics of the region and in this new possible Middle East, the Syrian regime is the only former USSR ally. Moreover, for Russia, an economic takeover of the former-Soviet countries by EU and a political-military takeover by NATO are Russia's geopolitical borders that trigger Russia's reaction. Geopolitical borders are considered in this article as certain viable situations that mean to a country its position and status internally and/or externally. The US-Russian confrontational postures in the CIS and Europe due to the Ukrainian case and in the Middle East due to the Syrian case cause assertiveness and different alignment strategies implemented according to the interests of the players, significant enough to affect international politics and even the world order. The great power confrontations always shake up the existing world order and the cooperation-diplomacy-equilibrium of interests between them settles the world order. Every settlement among the major powers in the international system brings a new world order, and a clash of the major powers at the mutually important proxies contribute to a turning point of the existing world order. Each is pursuing geopolitical alignments that bolster its strength and status in the world affairs, therefore certain geopolitical borders represent non-negotiable concessions. The US is strengthening its alliance with Europe, its allies in Asia and Middle East. On the other side, Russia's diplomatic coordination and ongoing dialogue for the transfer of advanced weapon systems to China, India, and Turkey strengthens the geopolitical alignments outside the Western Hemisphere camp.

According to Friedman in a New York Time article, "Russia may not be seeking a revolution of the international order but Putin's departure from the standard great power competition is leading to shifts in great power politics that could have revolutionary consequences even if Putin is not motivated by revolutionary ideology." (Friedman, 2016) The former Russian Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev warned that a very dangerous arms race and geopolitical conflict has already begun. (Durdin, 2016) This article agrees with Rolf Mowatt-Larsen's opinion about the current US-Russian relationship that, "What the US sees as being stabilizing to global order, Russia sees as destabilizing. What the US regards as being destabilizing behavior, Russia assesses it as being stabilizing." (Mowatt-Larsen, 2016) John J. Mearsheimer commented in the Valdai Discussion Club that Russia did not object with NATO's expansions until it reached the Baltics' area in 2004 and offered membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008, because 'great powers are

sensitive about neighboring countries' and in Mearsheimer's view expansion into Ukraine was a mistake. (Mearsheimer, 2016)

Basically, the post-Ukrainian situation is already at a stage which can be concluded as a start of a new phase of post-Cold War, and this is due to Russia's assertiveness to defend its status quo as far as its geopolitical borders in CIS, Middle East and elsewhere are concerned. Therefore, this article concludes that it has been mutual assertiveness for the US to defend and expand the western hemisphere, and for Russia to defend its status quo as a great power in Eurasia. Even in the area of strategic stability, both have been equally concerned with maintaining stability and preventing the other's superiority in acquiring technologically superior nuclear arms. However this article narrows its discussion into the outcome of the Ukrainian and Syrian events for the US-Russian assertiveness.

Conceptual approach

This article looks at the US-Russian assertiveness through the sense of rational realism, which is a conceptual position added to the other variants of realism. In this article, rational realism entails that the outcome of the international events - the geopolitical borders affect the foreign policy behaviour of states -assertiveness, whether of the great powers and other states. Rational realism is not an established theory of great powers' politics but it offers a specific explanation about the US-Russian assertiveness, in the sense that assertiveness can be a behaviour by choice or necessity. Assertiveness is the result of certain international situations that compel a state, great power or not, to take offensive or unilateral actions. Compared with the other variants of realism, rational realism in this article highlights the correlation between the geopolitical borders and assertiveness, and this correlation demonstrates the degree of choice and necessity.

Firstly the empirical discussion of this article examines the correlation between assertiveness and the geopolitical borders (events) of Ukraine and Syria, a correlation which is a matter of a political nature. As such it can take the form of power, security, and military strength of defensive and offensive versions. Furthermore such correlation makes the status of the US-Russian disagreements more prone-to-war. To be noted, China's role and North Korea's case are two other powerful roles and factors relevant to the discussion in this article. However this article keeps the emphasis on the US-Russian bilateral affairs in the cases of Ukraine and Syria. The issue behind the Ukrainian and Syrian crises is about territorial gains, proxy regime, and in the case of North Korea it is about preventing the nuclear proliferation of a rogue country. Rational realism also highlights the difference of great powers' behaviour towards their proxies, towards small states, and towards each other. The second shortcoming of the rational realism approach comes from the fact that it does not include in its analysis the domestic politics and state's capabilities which are two other critical factors in the type of assertiveness used - by choice or by necessity.

In this correlation, the behaviour of smaller countries involved in a certain geopolitical border, concretely Ukraine and Syria, has consequences too, although they do not seek global status like the US and Russia. Neither Ukraine nor Syria are a threat or a gain to the US's status and strength, but they are significant political steps for the geopolitical influence in the CIS and Middle East because the policies of major powers are different from the policies of small/weaker states. Ukraine and Syria used to be more dependent on Russia than on the US. Gradually the dependency on Russia weakened and shifted towards the US' side, because the Ukrainian government prefers an EU and US orientation vector, and Syria is in a fragile status due to the many jihadi-terrorist groups fighting within the country.

Hans Morgenthau's realism argues that even 'rational' statesmen pursue policies of accumulating more and more power. (Waltz, 1988:616) John J. Mearsheimer, an advocate of structural realism (neorealism) argues that the unrelenting pursuit of power by the major powers means that "they are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favour." (Mearsheimer, 2001:3) As a neorealist, Mearsheimer further asserts that the great powers seek to maximize their power to attain the status of global hegemon militarily through conquest, and as no power can become the global hegemon, the international politics will continue to be characterized by great powers' competition and war. Offensive realism emphasizes the military security and power for hegemony as the ends of the states, and defensive realism emphasizes sufficient military strength to deter the external attacks and ensure a state's self-preservation. Classical realism too (Machiavelli, Thucydides) advocates for a state's strong military might to ensure its survival in the twists and turns of the international system. Rational realism in this article, argues that the correlation of international critical events with the foreign policy behaviour of great powers and other states is a matter of political nature and the assertiveness on the geopolitical borders, concretely Syria and Ukraine,

provides balance of power and balance of threat. Nevertheless, such balance is costly for Ukraine and Syria, and there is need for a political solution that takes into account the concerns of these two countries too –Ukraine and Syria.

Rational realism includes realism associated with the element of rationality. Rational because all countries try to proceed with prudence and caution both in the defensive and offensive approaches of maintaining their respective national interests. The nature of the US-Russian relations, whether mutually assured security or contest for influence impacts almost decisively the status of the world order because it creates an atmosphere of either international moderation or international tension. Each as a great power continues to design its national interests according to the international vicissitudes. For the US, the strategic global dominance regionally and globally continues to be a national interest since the end of Second World War. For Russia, continuing to be the great power in Eurasia and Middle East also remains a national interest. Currently, Russia's assertiveness is trying to prove and demonstrate that the US' superpower dominance cannot come at the price of Russia's losing its great power status in CIS and within the strategic stability formula. In such situation, Russia joins China, both attempting to contain the US.

An analysis of rational realism based on other case studies and offering different viewpoints can be used to re-evaluate this approach in the future.

The US-Russian Geopolitical Alignments

Assertiveness seems to be not a well-analysed foreign policy behaviour, it contributes to many forms of foreign policy orientation- such as deterrence, geopolitics and self-preservation of national interests. It is a foreign policy behaviour responding to an international event to safeguard the national interests by taking into consideration the status of the countries involved. A manifestation of great powers' assertiveness in world politics is demonstrated in the coalitions that they create.

In the post-Cold War era, the countries started to shift their ideological orientation towards democracy at the global level. However as the international scenario is fluid, it became again a mixed scenario of albeit better stability was produced by the US and the Western organizations, who had to deal with different kinds of concerns, threats and reactions towards the West. Despite the emerging international stability at the great power level based on democratic rules, cooperation and governance, the wars and conflicts based on ethnicity and nationalism have never ceased. These factors create changes on the geopolitical alignments between countries at the different levels of the international system. Here again enters the assertiveness of the major powers- US and Russia in this article, an assertiveness triggered and fuelled at the points of geopolitical borders. For instance the future geopolitical influence of US and Russia in CIS through Ukraine, in European security through NATO, in Middle East through Syria and in Asia through the North Korean case- these are issues in which both US and Russia feel the need to demonstrate its political stance, military posture and capabilities in case of a war.

Internationalism became the new trend of the international system from 1990 until the successful Ukrainian colour revolution 2014. The post-Ukrainian revolution produced a stronger layer of nationalism in Russian assertiveness. Russia's independent assertiveness triggers a stronger sense of nationalism at the level of major powers and secondary powers, in which each starts to enhance its independent foreign policy, initiatives and alignments that preserve the place of their nationalism internally and externally. Therefore it can be asserted that the kind of geopolitical partnerships that Russia's assertiveness contributes to, creates the establishment of significant non-Western diverse alignments that emphasize nationalism more than internationalism. Such nationalistic orientation is preferable for countries such as China, India, Japan, Britain and Turkey. Whereas the Western team emphasizes internationalism. Therefore, it can be claimed that the US prefers geopolitical alignments that emphasize internationalism and is cautious with the countries that project nationalism in their geopolitics. While on the other hand, the Russian geopolitical alignments pursue internationalism initiatives that serve to strengthen and preserve the uniqueness of their nationalism. This contributed to the political currents of the world order.

The US alignment with Europe and its leadership over the long-established global institutions such as NATO (militarily-collective defence), World Bank, International Monetary Fund and International Court of Justice has created and led a powerful and successful Western alliance. Alternatively, Russia's geopolitical alignments with China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Philippines, CIS-Collective Security Treaty Organization, Iran, and Turkey represent geopolitical alignments that are shaping alliances outside the Western team, alliances which prefer to be sovereign democracies inclined to self-reliance economically and militarily, thus creating the non-Western side of the international system. China is a great power economically, while Russia is a great power militarily, geographically located in a more significant area for the US concerns, between the Middle East, Asia and Europe. In the economic front, the military-technical cooperation, gas and energy pipelines have been important sources of revenue for both

these countries. Regarding the stand of US and Russia in the Middle East, Europe, CIS, and Asia, a strategic frame of simultaneous dialogue-cooperation and deterrence-containment continues to be a code of conduct in the US-Russian bilateral relations.

In the contemporary atmosphere of the US-Russian relations, these two countries are trying to enforce a compliance on each other through strategic deterrence and diplomatic retaliation tailored according to the proxies and geopolitical alignments. Also, these two countries are defending its own assertiveness in the geopolitical borders where they are clashing- concretely, Syria and Ukraine through the United Nations Security Council platform. Despite the fact that in general, President Trump has advocated for a more conciliatory tone and cooperative stance with Russia, the pursuit of the US' position as the leading country of world politics remains paramount for all administrations. The current US administration has pursued a doctrine different from its predecessors - it has questioned the position of its allies and non-allies in terms of the US interests and opting for new independent geopolitical relationships in Europe, Middle East, Asia, and CIS. In the case of Syria, the US attacks on the Syrian regime due to the belief that the regime used chemicals in Khan Sheikhoun which killed almost 90 civilians exacerbated the mistrust between the US and Russia, because foed Russia the event needs an impartial investigation and a decision from the UN Security Council to decide cooperatively on the result of the investigation and how to act upon it. Even the strategies of defeating ISIS and terrorism differ between US and Russia because they have different assertiveness towards a post-ISIS and post-terrorism Syria and Middle East. Within the current American administration there are internal disagreements regarding the degree to which a cooperation with Russia can be expected or offered.

How will the Trump administration proceed with the status quo of the US and Western block's interests, and with the Russian status as the great power in Eurasia is still unknown, but what is sure to follow, is the US assertiveness for global leadership in whatever new strategies may take place under the new administration, paralleled with the Russian assertiveness to defend its status in Eurasia, CIS, and in ensuring the strategic stability is maintained.

George D. O'Neill JR in his essay refers to Congressman Howard Buffett's statement that "we cannot talk world cooperation and practice power politics" (O'Neill, 2017). This article suggests that the great powers should measure their geopolitical and sphere of influence ambitions cautiously and should not provoke each other at geopolitical borders because this triggers confrontational reactions. The CIS region and Syria have become the US-Russian geopolitical frontiers and different relevant coalitions are taking place due to Russia's assertiveness to defend its status quo. To Russia, the Syrian crisis means an advantage for its role and influence in the Middle East; to the US it means getting closer and closer to shaping a Middle East according to the US interests and designs. In the numerous Syrian peace talks, the composition of the opposition groups remains an obstacle because it has not become clear who the rebels are and who are the terrorists. Furthermore, after the gas attack on the rebels' zone, the US demands for a divided Syria with a part in which Russia can maintain its strategic advantage and a Syria without Bashar al-Assad and his team. Russia, China, and Iran have voiced out against this demand with the perspective of non-interference in the internal affairs of Syria and other countries.

In Ukraine and in Syria, gaining or losing territory has become critical and significant for the ground warfare preparations despite the claims of preferring a political solution. This article agrees with the opinions expressed by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Cohen who argue that in the case of Ukraine, the West should have acknowledged and anticipated what kind of reaction it would trigger from Russia. (Mearsheimer, 2014; Cohen, 2015). Another argument of this article is that neither the US nor Russia intends to sacrifice the relationship with each other, for Ukraine, Syria or any other kind of proxy nation. Probably behind the scenes there are efforts to prepare and strengthen their relevant proxies to gain advantage in the ground warfare, but they are not willing to engage in a direct confrontation with each other. Nevertheless, the US' unilateral decision to issue stronger military warnings to the Syrian regime after the chemical attack event in Khan Sheikhoun, to Afghanistan against the supposed ISIS presence, and against North Korea through heavier deployments in South China Sea, are some of the US' initiatives opposed by Russia and China. Such assertiveness on the part of the US, leads to a geopolitical situation which contains each other's assertiveness.

The post-Cold War strategy of engaging Russia with the Euro-Atlantic coalition failed at the point of the Ukrainian colour revolution and the Syrian, because Syria and Ukraine represent the diverse US and Russian strategic designs for the positions each wants to hold in the CIS and Middle East.

The intensity of the Syrian and Ukrainian internal instabilities is heightened because they represent an open-door access into CIS and Middle East for both the US and Russian roles into these regions. Ukraine represents the US-Russian involvement and contest for significant role in designing the CIS political foothold (which in the

eyes of Russia is a non-negotiable geopolitical concession for as long as Russia is a great power), and of the European security due to NATO's complete security umbrella over Europe and Russia's perceptions about it. Also the Ukrainian crisis means to Russia security and influence, whereas to US it means expansion of the Western block, but it comes at the expense of Russia's geopolitical borders and security.

Although the Syrian situation is tightly interconnected with the aftermath of the situations in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Yemen, and Nigeria, it is an interconnection that needs Syria, goes through and relates to Syria, this relates to the different terrorist cells, the position of the Kurdish provinces, and the Sunni-Shia sects. Therefore, whatever geopolitical roadmap is being envisioned for Middle East and Africa, the reasons and justifications to build that roadmap are found in Syria and go through Syria. Syria remains one of the vital points of such a geopolitical map of Middle East and Africa, or for the vision of the Greater Middle East. Syria represents the shape, influence and security architecture of the Middle East, which includes the status of different terrorist cells, the Iran-Gulf relations, and the nature of the US and Russia's political foothold in this region. Russia on its side, due to the ongoing level of mistrust and its independent active assertiveness cannot compromise on the air base and naval base it has in Syria, the Tartus naval base and even the Bassel al Assad airfield which gives Russia new strength and deterrent capabilities versus the other regional players.

The US has tried to "lock China and Russia into an American-dominated world order, assert economic and security dominance through institutional influence, and setting the rules and mobilizing the allies in common global struggles" (Lake: 2006). In the US' strategy, the regional hegemony should be US allies in order to support, enhance, and boost the US hegemonic position, unlike in the case of Russia and China who aim to be peers and cooperative, but not to be under the US domination. From the above mentioned elaboration it can be determined that the assertiveness for status quo has been mutual, and the difference regarding the degree of importance placed on the internationalism trend by the US and the nationalism trend by Russia leads these two countries towards undertaking independent initiatives in world affairs or cooperating with each other, according to what the status quo's national interests dictate.

Aggressive Deterrence

Deterrence includes the condition of mutual retaliation capabilities, and area denial capabilities which can be of conventional and nonconventional forms to deter an adversary. Deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment need credible capabilities to issue credible threats. Between US and Russia the deterrence condition includes defending the buffer zone, defending the territory of proxies and defending against preventive and retaliatory deterrence. According to some opinions "a great power can achieve deterrence by denial by making an ally or a piece of territory harder to take" (Mitchell, 2015).

Between the US and Russia, the level of deterrence has been mutual since when nuclear deterrence was achieved in 1960s, but after Crimea became part of the Russian territory in 2014, the West is standing up overtly and covertly to prevent another unilateral Russian initiative in the Baltics and the Black Sea zone. Russia also has increased its conventional and nonconventional readiness at high level. In response to the Russian unilateral initiative in Crimea, NATO has developed closer partnerships for deterrence with the Baltic countries - Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, in addition with Finland, Sweden, and Poland. NATO has also decided to strengthen the defence engagements in Central-Eastern parts of Europe to defend the territorial security of the NATO allies. The US-Russian kind of deterrence is planned to prevent a war but also to win it. International security itself is never at rest, at peace or balanced, and Syria and Ukraine have caused a serious geopolitical rift between the US and Russia. Nortberg Rottgen, Chairman of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee describes Russia's current policy as "trying to write a new chapter in a book we thought we had closed long ago" (Financial Times: 2014). In the Russian view, according to Putin in the Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, on the 12th of December, 2013, 'had Russia not acted in Ukraine, NATO's navy would have been in the port of Sevastopol in Crimea, creating 'not an illusory threat but a perfectly real threat to the whole southern Russia.'" (President of the Russian Federation, 2014) As a consequence, the post-Ukraine and post-Crimea scenario brought NATO's Readiness Action Plan with six new command centers in Eastern Europe to train the local military forces with NATO through better cooperation and connection (Stone & McFaul, 2015).

The discord of interests over Syria and Ukraine has resulted in strong nuances of assertiveness, which has created new imbalances between the mutually assured security and contest for influence projections. This article claims that due to the significance of Ukraine for the CIS and the significance of Syria for the current Middle East scenario, the

crises in Ukraine and Syria have triggered a Russian foreign policy looking for geopolitical alignments that will protect Russia's position in Middle East and CIS.

This article highlights that in the geopolitical borders of Ukraine and Syria, the core of the US-Russian agreement revolves around who gains advantage in the ground, rather than a reciprocal agreement over how to settle the situation of these two proxies, because of what these two proxies (Ukraine and Syria) represent. Despite the ongoing negotiations regarding the settlement of these two crises, this article wants to make the point that every cease-fire and truce, whether it was the Minsk or Geneva negotiations, basically it deals with the lines and territorial advances made in the proxy countries. Hall Gardner in his essay is of the opinion that "in today's differing geostrategic circumstances, if NATO cannot soon switch off its "open enlargement" autopilot, and if the US and Europeans cannot come to terms with the Russian Federation over the question of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, in Syria and the 'wider Middle East' as well, the world could be heading toward a dangerous collision between rival nuclear powers and their alliances" (Gardner, 2016).

The new US administration has proceeded cautiously but also ambiguously with these geopolitical borders (Ukraine, Syria) and with its geopolitical designs in CIS and Middle East because a coherent and unified strategic vision within the new administration is still in the process of emerging therefore it remains to be seen, but the mutual assertiveness for the defense of status quo will continue. This stage of assertiveness is part of the cyclical US-Russian strategic rivalry and cooperation around each other, and is a part of major powers' code of conduct in international affairs. Looking at the nature of deterrence between the US and Russia, including China and other major countries, it can be emphasized that when there is a clash of vital interests between the great powers which are militarily powerful, then deterrence by denial is the preferred containment strategy. Whereas in the set-up of the great powers relationship with smaller and weaker countries, then deterrence by threat or deterrence by punishment will be the employed strategy.

The Use of Diplomacy

There is the need for diplomacy to keep under control the rival's assertiveness and the confrontational position. The US and Russia are not adversaries but rivals and competitors, thus they represent a potential threat to each other's geopolitical goals. The vital geopolitical borders discussed in this article, Syria and Ukraine, and the other geopolitical borders like strategic stability, war against terrorism and North Korea are concerns of how the US and Russia throw their weight around in these vital points. As the US and Russia intend to impose its status on these vital points assertively and unilaterally, it is important to allow diplomacy to ensure that both US and Russia's status quo are not threatened. Usually, US and Russia prefer to play coercive diplomacy from the position of strength, but currently there is the need for a broader diplomatic strategy between these two countries and not to provoke the vital interests of either one.

The contemporary posture of the US-Russian bilateral affair is again facing contest and lack of trust, as expressed by the Russian and the American side. The diplomacy has not produced any common ground yet on how to cooperate against ISIS, how to settle the Ukrainian, Syrian (and recently the North Korean issues, because each of these cases represents the political-military influence for US and Russia in the regions where these countries and proxies are located. North Korea is a matter of concern between Russia and China, and the US is concerned with the North Korean nuclear advances and the possibility that behind the scenes North Korea might assist Iran, Syria or any terrorist group to be in possession of such weapons and their know-how. Such non-diplomatic and prone-to-war readiness' posture are taking place because the geopolitical borders where the two are being mutually assertive will determine the outcome of geopolitics in the CIS and in the Middle East. The political influence of the US and Russia in Eurasia and Middle East are important for global influence, oil, energy pipelines, and also for strategic global routes.

An important matter to be noted is that the strength of diplomacy comes down to the role of human decision makers, except for the numerous factors that contribute to the situation. Valerie M. Hudson argues that human decision makers dictate the core of the states' behaviour not the states, because states are abstractions, and the agency of human beings is the source of all international politics and all the change therein. (Hudson, 2005) Furthermore Hudson argues that in foreign policy the "situational interpretation and problem representation is done by human agents" (Hudson, 2005). Basically the US and Russian decision makers prefer to play coercive diplomacy from the position of strength.

The diplomatic initiatives about the geopolitical alignments aims to contribute to US-Russian diplomacy which prevents the point of direct clash and each gets what it wants at the geopolitical borders. In the sense of diplomacy,

the Russian active international strategy (after the Ukrainian event), is by performing active diplomatic engagements with the countries that are allies with the US and also with the Russia, in every region. Such tactics boost Russia's role and participation in the geopolitical alignment of every region, such as the EU, SCO, BRICS, and CSTO. In Europe, there seems to be a discord within European countries over how to tread between cooperation and sanction with Russia. Despite the ongoing elections in different European countries, whoever may be the new political elite or the new political party that wins the election, it will have to manoeuvre between these two lanes – to support cooperation with Russia and how to oppose Russia's stance on Ukraine and Syria. In Asia, Russia is interested to maintain good relations with South Korea, Japan, China, Philippines, and North Korea for purposes of good trade. Therefore, the US-Russian international diplomacy for the 21st century can be described as the US hegemonic diplomacy to maintain the predominance of the US' ideological, economic and security umbrella through the main centers of power in every region, a close relationship with European allies and a stronger NATO. On the other side, the Russian diplomatic response is focused on a dual-balanced diplomatic relations for economic, trade, and security purposes with the US' allies and Russian allies in every region, with the purpose to support and strengthen its status as one of the great powers in the international system for the coming century.

Plenty of writings argue that the lack of central authority in the international system triggers states' political awareness for self-reliance in security and economy. However no central authority just like no international organization has been able to manage the great powers' power. United Nations has only partially managed the US-Russian negotiations in the General Assembly or the Security Council, only when their interests have been of mutual relevance. But in the events of diverse interests and geopolitical borders, neither the UN nor the majority could ever impose a decision that would go against the US or Russian interests, in terms of the veto power they possess, also in terms of their great power capabilities. Moreover, the fact that each possesses the retaliatory capacity contributes significantly to such assertiveness. Trevor Taylor argues that 'It is merely a self-evident aspect of power-thinking that what a state can do in international politics depends on the power it possesses' (Taylor, 1978:122).

However it needs to be noted that it has always been claimed the approach of peace-through-strength by both US and Russia towards each other and their rivals if the need for such call comes. Nevertheless, this article holds the view that since the end of the Second World War the great powers have clashed for proxies and through proxies for almost seventy years, until the post-Ukrainian stage which has triggered dangerous American and Russian military postures and preparations against each other. The post-Ukrainian colour revolution situation has signalled a turning point in the code of conduct between the US and Russia, each is preparing not only for deterrence but even for the winning-capabilities with each other, if it comes. Also the claims from President Trump on major important issues keep shifting between pragmatic, flexible and rigid stance, which makes unclear the scenario of the US' stance as a whole.

This article also holds that in the case of the great powers, US-Russia (including China) the essential component is the behaviour of these powers, rather than the structure of the international system, because the relationships between the great powers determine, shape and change the structure of the international system. It has become an intermingled international politics' scenario, Russia has attempted to win over the US allies, bilaterally or in any form. The US also has attempted numerous initiatives to influence the Russian allies or areas of influence. Also, the allies themselves have often tried to manipulate the Russian concerns and the US concerns to their interests. India is cooperating with both Russia and the US, so too Japan and South Korea; the EU is usually caught between the US policies and Russian policies regarding the CIS and NATO; Turkey and Israel stand between the US' and Russia's posture in Middle East and Europe; Gulf and Iran too stand on this same line as Turkey and Israel; China as well - concerns that resemble the sphere of influence in the region where each is geographically located. There have been many diplomatic meetings between high-level officials of US and Russia, which at present have not been fruitful to establish a US-Russian common ground because the above mentioned geopolitical borders represent national interests for these two countries.

Finally, there are implications for the current course of US-Russian relations. Assertiveness manifests in the form of nationalism, upholding national interests and projecting the status of a country. These factors are important components of the US and Russian rationale for their geopolitical alignments. A crucial strategy of Russia's statecraft recently has focused on the balance between the two important opposing sides in every region – cultivating relations and diplomatic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia; Pakistan and India; Japan-South Korea and China; Russian speaking people in the CIS and Baltic countries; looking for bases in Cuba and Vietnam; strengthening its leadership in CIS multilaterally and bilaterally, a joint air defence with Armenia, boosting business and trade cooperation with Kazakhstan, agreement with Azerbaijan in the OPEC format to freeze the global oil output, and Belarus still stands in its previous position as neither pro-EU nor pro-Russia, preferring a safe independent space between these two players.

Regarding the US' side, it continues to pursue the course of strengthening the transatlantic unity, mutual relevance and mutual assessment of the global threats. The strength of the trans-atlanticism depends on the strength of the US-Europe relations. Brexit and the internal European Union turbulences are not signs of weakened trans-atlanticism, but signs that it needs to be adjusted and take into account Russia's determination to defend its status quo in CIS.

The international system comprises of Western and non-Western ways of thinking, perceptions of democracy, revisionist and status quo powers. This article recommends that for the US to maintain its global dominance in the 21st century, it will have to choose between Russia and China, whose alignment can strengthen the US global leadership in the world affairs. In the opinion of John J. Mearsheimer, as China continues to rise, it is not a good idea for the US to have soured relations with Russia (Mearsheimer, 2016). Robert Jervis asserts that "The inability to recognize that one's own actions could be seen as menacing and the concomitant belief that the other's hostility can only be explained by its aggressiveness help explain how conflicts can easily expand beyond that which an analysis of the objective situation would indicate is necessary" (Jervis, 1976: 175). However, this article also holds that the belief that 'borders should not be redrawn at the barrel of a gun, that nations have the right to determine their own future,' (Office of Press Secretary, White House, 2014) not equally applied between the major powers, secondary powers and the small-weak states. Numerous events have historically and currently proven that all the major powers of different eras make use of force to unite or divide borders or populations according to the grand designs they articulate as national interests.

The above discussion puts forth the core argument of this article, that the clash of geopolitical borders creates the confrontational US-Russian postures in the current geopolitical atmosphere. As a consequence, these two powers tend to pursue diverse geopolitical alignments capable of withstanding the other and these contribute to the current US-Russian differences and assertiveness.

Conclusion

Between US and Russia there is always a rivalry mixed with confrontation and cooperation, also both countries remain vigilant and caution on the level of trust they have towards each other. The main findings of this article are that, the US-Russian bilateral relations have been mutually assertive and to keep under control the assertiveness it is necessary to establish some form of an alliance of regional integration that would serve to recognize each other's areas of dominance in a way that preserves for the US its global leadership and for Russia its dominance in Eurasia. Secondly, this diplomatic context could decrease the level of tension, mistrust and hostile perceptions, and could establish a diplomatic code of conduct between the US and Russia. An alliance of US-Russian geopolitical alignments could establish a great powers' system for this century through mutual relevance and contribute to decreasing the tensions and provocations between these two countries. Thirdly, NATO and the EU countries bilaterally do cooperate with Russia, the CIS, CSTO countries and these countries also bilaterally do cooperate with the US and EU. Here the incompatibility of interests stands between the concerns of the major powers, so that the alignment of proxies is not curtailed and the neighbouring parameters not threatened by the military presence of a rival or a peer.

Fourthly, in the US-Russian bilateral relations, Russia's response will depend on how the US and NATO will try to approach, cooperate or challenge Russia's status and interests in the EU region, and Russia's client state in the Middle East, Syria. This political-military-economic struggle and contest will proceed rationally in terms of preventing a direct war with each other, as well as assertively to defend and advance the national interest as far as their proxies and geopolitical borders are concerned, which remains the core foreign policy of both US and Russia.

Finally, from the descriptive and prescriptive discussion of this article, it becomes clear that mutual assertiveness and rational realism explain Russia's diverse geopolitical alignments which emphasize nationalism more than internationalism, and the US-led long-term international institutions which emphasize internationalism more than nationalism. Secondary powers and small/weak states will align with internationalism, but the major powers align with nationalism, and this is the difference that shakes the world order at different points of time, whether by decades or by centuries time frame. At the core of the current US-Russian disagreements and aggressive assertiveness is the difference between the US' internationalism and Russian nationalism (China also prefers nationalism), rather than democratic vs. non-democratic camps. Democracies and non-democracies have cooperated well when it suited national interests, and even democracies have seriously disagreed when it has not served their national interests. Despite pessimism or optimism associated with how the new US' Trump administration will proceed in the internationalism policies and the degree of cooperation and challenge towards Russia (China too), the mutual

assertiveness and the rational realism will be the US-Russian foreign policy frame, especially in the geopolitical borders.

Endnotes

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² Monroe Doctrine refers to the US' foreign policy conduct initiated in 1850s by the administration of James Monroe and the Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. According to this doctrine at that time, neither the European powers should seek to colonize the North-South American countries, nor would the US interfere in the European affairs. The Monroe Doctrine has been pursued by the US administrations until nowadays.

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